And the Oscar Goes To...

Icon Image Graphics, SGIA/PDAA member since 2011, had the tremendous opportunity to be an integral part in one of the highlight moments of the 2016 Academy Awards. Superstar Lady Gaga gave a moving performance on a shiny, white grand piano — and it was wrapped by none other than Icon Image Graphics. SGIA had the chance to sit down with Sino Tour, Director of Operations at Icon Image, to talk about their unforgettable experience.

How were you found to do this project? Were you commissioned, did you need to put in an RFP, etc.?

Because of our expertise in musical instrument wraps for many televised events and reputable music artists, our client was incredibly comfortable in calling us directly for the last-minute task. We were in the middle of working on a massive amount of vinyl wraps for Rihanna’s upcoming world tour (a three-week project) and special vehicle wraps for an upcoming Marvel Studios film when we were summoned to install one of the largest grand pianos on the market. To avoid any leaks or spoilers, we actually did not know that it was for the Academy Awards or Lady Gaga until we had arrived at the rehearsal space to begin the project.

How did you decide on 3M for the material?

For most of our high-end projects, we would submit a series of film swatches from a select group of vinyl manufacturers. Depending on the nature of certain projects, our design concepts and product recommendations would also be included. For this particular project, it was our choice to select the material as long as it was gloss white and that we can make the finish product look like “paint.” From Pharrell to Mariah Carey, 3M’s 1080 film series has always been the top choice selected by most artists, their creative team and the show’s designers to temporarily or permanently change the look of their backline or production set. Whether it is 3M’s array of color selection and finishes or the basic warranty factors, we have never had any problems with their film, especially during the delicate removal phase where problems could arise due to the delicate substrates of certain instruments — such as very expensive guitars or drum kits.

Why not use a white piano, versus a black one that needed to be wrapped?

Because of the time crunch, everyone involved in the production including Yamaha was not able to locate or secure a white, 9-foot grand piano. The option to wrap it became the obvious choice along with their confidence in our ability to install and deliver on such a short notice. This was a stressful and challenging job, but I have such a topnotch customs team who keeps us organized, mobile and efficient so that we are able to maintain and service these specialty projects. I constantly remind my team in both the office or on the field that the prep for each of our custom or fleet work is critical.

Was there any unique challenge in regards to the Yamaha branding?

The Oscar telecast each year is one of the most watched television events in the entire world (in over 200 countries as per an Academy member). To feature the Yamaha brand with an artist of Lady Gaga’s caliber would probably be the perfect marketing coup for any company. As per the client, we had to adhere to two requests, which was to correctly install the “Yamaha” decals (in three separate spots on the piano) on the wrap based on its original alignment and placement before it was installed.
Secondly, they wanted us to replicate a “painted” look and advised us to pay close attention to our seams or overlays with the film. In the age of high-definition, every aspect of your work will be seen in fine detail on television.

Did the fact that it was a musical instrument change how you did the install? In other words, was there any fear that the sound quality could be affected, or were there special measures you took to prevent any damage that you wouldn’t normally have to think about?

We mainly had to be careful with our detail work (e.g. cuts) even though a large amount of knifeless tape was used during the installation phase. As part of our prep work, we were provided with photos of the actual piano so we could start engineering the wrap by taking measurements and allocating film to specific areas before we even arrived to the venue. We also checked and received help from our client about what parts of the piano we could remove to install separately for a more seamless appearance. After we were finished, they performed a sound check on the unit and no changes in the sound quality was reported. Lastly, every inch of the piano was triple-checked for any lifting, bubbling or loose film that may have not been trimmed especially around all the corners. The piano had to be “camera-ready” from all angles and in working order to accommodate any last minute changes to the staging of the performance as well as the many camera shots.

This was a very high-profile installation. Did that create any new challenges? Was this the first time you’ve been involved in an event of that magnitude?

A couple of the challenges we had faced was the timeframe to complete the wrap as well as our hectic schedule that week — some of our custom installers were on another project. Aside from installing the whole exterior of the piano in one full day, we also had to install parts of the interior as they wanted several options to either shoot the camera with the piano lid open or closed during the performance. With awards shows, all the camera setups, costumes, lighting, etc. that were originally scripted or mapped out by production can drastically change each hour during rehearsals.

Did you wrap it at your business and then ship, or did you wrap onsite?

We wrapped the piano at the rehearsal space and then it was delivered to the show for us to apply any touch-ups and further post-heating if necessary. However, the next day we received a phone call that more film needed to be applied underneath a small section of the piano lid because of a staging issue. Because Lady Gaga and the piano would be placed on risers, the concern shifted to audience members and people watching the Oscars on television who could see that there was no film installed underneath this area. We literally had less than an hour to perfect the wrap with additional film so that the crew could continue with their scheduled rehearsal.

Did you and/or your team at least get to attend the show? Meet any stars?

We did not attend the show this year because of other work commitments and their strict deadlines. Our schedule has been a constant balancing act of multiple projects or programs that are round-the-clock from our high-end custom to fleet/commercial work. We have attended numerous award shows and have been fortunate to work backstage — witnessing and/or being a part of so many astonishing, creative highlights and moments at each event. And yes, we have met or seen so many famous faces and their teams who have supported our company and the use of vinyl wraps for their performances.

On a side note, we did receive a private tour of the venue prior to the actual show date, including the star-studded, red carpet and the Governor’s Ball, which is actually upstairs from the Dolby — we always thought this party was at a separate location. We never thought we would ever have that opportunity to walk the Oscar red carpet or wrap a grand piano for Lady Gaga’s emotional performance that has now been seen by the entire world. This experience is definitely one of the coolest and
remarkable gigs in our company’s nine-year history!

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